



NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

*Photos from today's award ceremony in Washington, D.C., are available
to download from the district's Web site at
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NATIONAL OFFICER OF THE YEAR AWARD HONORS AREA LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

OFFICERS RECOVERED KIDNAPED INFANT AFTER MOTHER'S MURDER IN SKIDMORE

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – Todd P. Graves, United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, announced that five area law enforcement officers have received the National Officer of the Year award from the Department of Justice and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. They were recognized by U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales at a ceremony in Washington, D.C., today for their work in quickly recovering kidnapped infant Victoria Stinnett soon after the baby was removed from the womb of her murdered mother in December 2004.

Honored as Officer of the Year were **Sheriff Ben Espey** of the Nodaway County, Mo., Sheriff's Department, **Corporal Jeffery M. Owen** and **Sergeant David Merrill**, both of the Missouri State Highway Patrol, **Investigator Randy Strong** of the Maryville, Mo., Department of Public Safety and **Special Agent Kurt Lipanovich** of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The officers also received the National Missing Children Award.

"These local, state and federal law enforcement officers exemplify teamwork among all levels of law enforcement," Graves said. "Their quick action and resourcefulness transformed what could have been an even worse tragedy into the return of a healthy child to her family. I know they have the profound gratitude of that family, and they have our respect for a job well done and an honor well deserved."

Gonzales today commemorated National Missing Children's Day by honoring law enforcement and citizens nationwide for their unprecedented teamwork and selfless efforts in the recovery of missing and exploited children. The local officers were among 25 honorees from across the nation who were recognized at a Department of Justice ceremony for their efforts to help missing and exploited children.

"A missing child is every parent's worst nightmare," said Gonzales. "Every day, the courageous men and women of law enforcement work tirelessly to recover missing and exploited children across our nation. We are grateful for their dedication, and today we recognize their valiant efforts to apprehend would-be predators and keep our communities safe."

On December 16, 2004, the mother of Bobbie Stinnett called 911 after she found her 23-year-old daughter dead in her Skidmore, Mo., home. Bobbie Stinnett had been expecting a baby, and the child had been cut from her womb. Nodaway County Sheriff Ben Espey was the first law enforcement officer on the scene. He learned that Bobbie Stinnett had a visitor earlier in the day who was interested in buying one of the dogs she bred. When told that a red car had earlier been parked in front of the victim's home, Espey issued an AMBER Alert, which included a description of the car and its license plate number, and contacted the Missouri State Highway Patrol for assistance. By tracing e-mail exchanges between Bobbie Stinnett and a woman who claimed to be a fellow dog breeder, FBI Agent Kurt Lipanovich and officials from the Missouri State Highway Patrol and the Maryville Department of Public Safety identified a suspect, 37-year-old Lisa Montgomery of Melvern, Kan., and were able to locate the baby. The baby, named Victoria, was returned to her father.

Graves noted that the recovery of Victoria Stinnett underscores the value of the AMBER Alert Program.

"The first few hours after an abduction are critical," Graves explained. "Among all children who are abducted and later found murdered, 74 percent are killed in the first three hours after being taken. That statistic motivated law enforcement officers to move as rapidly as possible when they learned an infant had been abducted, and thanks to their efforts, Victoria Stinnett did not become part of those homicide statistics."

The AMBER Alert Program is part of the PROTECT Act signed into law by President Bush in 2003. It is a voluntary partnership between law enforcement agencies and broadcasters to activate an urgent bulletin in the most serious child abduction cases. Broadcasters use the Emergency Alert System to deliver critical and immediate information to the community.

In 2001, there were only four states with the Amber Alert system. As of this year, all 50 states have AMBER programs. This year alone, law enforcement officers around the nation have already recovered and returned 17 missing children to grateful families. Last year this alert system helped to recover 71 children.

Nearly 800,000 children are reported missing every year. Some children run away, others may be lost or injured, while some may be abducted by a parent or a stranger. More than 100

children are abducted by strangers each year. Most often, child abductions are committed by family members—more than 200,000 annually—in an attempt to deprive a caretaker of custodial rights. Of the 58,200 non-family abductions each year in the United States, nearly all (98%) of these children were returned to their families safely.

This news release, as well as additional information about the office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, is available on-line at

www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow